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ABSTRACT

Administered by the 21-member School Community Council (SCC), the Fort Gay-Thompson Urban/Rural project attempts to involve both school personnel and community representatives in the planning of the community's educational program. The project's major goals are to develop and implement comprehensive staff training, and to combine efforts of staff and community involving educational decisions. The project is different things to different people. To some, it is an FM radio station, operated mostly by high school students, over which they hear their favorite music, local school and civic news, and other items of interest. To others, the project is a monthly newsletter containing school and community news, humorous short stories prepared by local authors, and, perhaps too frequently, local gossip. The project also is a career education program, a community center, a basic learning center, a recreational program, and numerous other activities. This paper briefly summarizes the project's evaluation, using data obtained from 65 questionnaires, 39 personal interviews, and 78 brief questionnaires designed to provide information about the FM radio station. The evaluation indicated that the most serious problems with the program have been a lack of community involvement and general community awareness concerning the education program. (NQ)

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THE FORT GAY, WEST VIRGINIA SCHOOL/COMMUNITY PROJECT: AN ASSESSMENT

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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A paper presented to the American Association of School Administrator's Annual Meeting at Las Vegas, Nevada, on February 25-28, 1977.

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ABSTRACT

The Fort Gay-Thompson Urban/Rural project is an attempt to involve both school personnel and community representatives in the planning of the community's educational program. This paper is a summary of the project evaluation presented at the Annual meeting of the American Association of School Administrators, and the full 85-page evaluation report which includes an evaluation plan, a display of the data, recommendations, and a copy of the questionnaires and interview schedule is included under the title "Evaluation of the Fort Gay-Thompson Urban/Rural Project" by Bertram, Lanham, Lynch, and Mays.

Description of the Project*

The Fort Gay-Thompson Urban/Rural School Community Project has many faces and is many different things. Technically, it is an Urban/Rural project with headquarters in Fort Gay, West Virginia (population, 792), administered by a School Community Council of 21 persons, and funded through the Education Professions Development Act which is administered from USOE Region III located in Philadelphia. But to the adults and students in the Fort Gay-Thompson community, the Urban/Rural project may be an FM radio station operated mostly by students at Fort Gay High over which they hear their favorite music, local school and civic news, and other items of interest. To others, a few of whom may be out of range of the radio station, the project is a monthly newsletter containing school and community news, humorous short stories prepared by local authors, and, perhaps too frequently, local gossip.

The project also has a strong career education program, and supports field trips for both students and teachers. For example, one student told the evaluators that he had been an exchange student on an American Indian reservation in Montana. For many, the project is a Community Center which included a crafts center, meals on wheels, and general community education. For example, a few weeks after the site visit by the evaluators, an Ethnic Heritage Day reportedly lured more than 1,000 visitors to the area, including one of the evaluators.

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*This paper is a summary of an 85-page evaluation report submitted to the Fort Gay-Thompson School Community Council. The full report contains instruments, descriptions of data analyses, recommendations, and the detailed evaluation plan. The report has been submitted to ERIC, and a limited number of copies can be obtained from AEL. The bibliographic entry of the full report is:

Bertram, Charles L., B. Lanham, M. Lynch, and P. Mays. "Evaluation of the Fort Gay-Thompson Urban/Rural Project" Charleston, West Virginia: Appalachia Educational Laboratory, September 20, 1976.

The project also supports a basic learning center as well as a recreation program during both the summer and the regular school year. Medical examinations are given for all students, and learning centers are provided for classrooms. A laminating machine is available in the high school library, and playground facilities have been provided through free labor and donated materials. Many of the teachers, and some community persons have been involved in workshops supported by the project, and persons from both groups have been sent to visit exemplary programs. A photographic laboratory has been installed in the high school, and teacher training at universities, including Marshall and Morehead, has been provided.

Currently in progress is a program to improve the arts curriculum, and books are being provided by the community library. These books mostly pertain to Appalachian heritage and, for the elementary library, history and other high interest books. A video tape giving the history of the Fort Gay-Thompson area is also under preparation. The School Development Team Manager for the Urban/Rural project is Mr. Joe A. Wellman, a native of Wayne County, West Virginia, and former principal of Fort Gay High, which is located in the west central section of Wayne County. The chairman of the School Community Council is Mr. Clarence Spencer, who teaches vocational agriculture at Fort Gay High. As described in the program plan, the two major goals of the Fort Gay-Thompson Urban Rural project are:

a. to develop and implement comprehensive staff training, and

b. to combine efforts of staff and community involving educational decisions.

The purpose of the Fort Gay-Thompson Urban/Rural project is to combine the efforts of school and community persons so as to provide a more effective educational program for the west central section of Wayne County, West Virginia. To date, the school-community planning process has resulted in a needs assessment, career education programs, considerable staff training, an FM radio

station, a community newsletter, a community center, a recreation program, and numerous other activities implemented through the 21-member School Community Council. The project has been funded at a level of approximately $150,000-$250,000 each year for the past five years.

Results of the Evaluation

The evaluation of the project has been completed by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory, Inc., of Charleston, West Virginia, and is primarily based on the use of questionnaires and interviews. More specifically, questionnaires were completed by 65 persons, and 39 persons were interviewed. All interviewees and questionnaire respondents were representative of the community, school staff, and persons who had given technical assistance to the project. In addition, 78 brief questionnaires designed to provide information about the FM radio station were returned by readers of the newsletter.

The responses to the questionnaire represent the assessment of community persons, school staff, and students who had systematically reviewed the objectives of the program, since the different items of the questionnaire are representative of those objectives. Under these conditions, the respondents appeared to feel quite positive about the training aspects of the project. Both the school staff and community persons felt that the quality of instruction had improved because of the in-service training which teachers had received as a result of the project. The career education and community education aspects of the project were also rated quite highly. Of the 40 rated items on the questionnaire, the two receiving the most positive response were "credit courses offered to new teachers were successful" and "career education units developed for the elementary grades are worthwhile."

According to the questionnaire respondents, the most serious problems with the program have been a lack of community involvement and general

community awareness concerning the education program, and some respondents indicated a general apathy existing in the community. The respondents, and especially the faculty, were also concerned about the health status and recreation opportunities in the community. They seemed to feel that the attendance rate of students was a serious problem in the Fort Gay-Thompson community, and that the project had not resulted in an increase in student attendance, as was one of its objectives.

Although there was considerable difference of opinion among the respondents, the overall tendency, especially among those representative of the community, was to give a positive rating to the project. When asked, "Overall, what is your impression of the Urban/Rural project?" a few individuals commented that the project had been a disappointment and that there had been no improvement in student learning or attendance, and that the relationship between the Council and teachers had not been the best. On the other hand, more individuals appeared to feel that the children had benefited very much from the program, and in spite of dissention among the School Community Council, much good for the community and its children had resulted from the efforts of those involved in the program.

Among the 39 persons who were interviewed, the most frequently mentioned weakness of the program pertained to the operation of the Council, a lack of continuity in its leadership, and, as with the questionnaire respondents, a lack of community participation and involvement. One of the persons interviewed, Dr. David Koontz of Marshall University, offered a unique perspective of the Council operation. Based on his experience with the project, he felt that the perceived dissention among Council members was actually a healthy indication of effective exchange of ideas; that many issues that resulted in active discussion between school staff and community members were problems that would remain dormant but burning issues in most similar rural communities. The

weekly meetings of the School Community Council may serve a function of conflict resolution, and thereby enhance the educational program of the community.

The outstanding achievements of the program, as related by the persons interviewed, was the FM radio station, the adult learning center, the library, and the teacher training program. The interviews were generally conducted before these persons responded to questionnaires, so that the interviewees had not recently been systematically led through the range of objectives of the Urban/Rural project. Since the FM radio station was generally mentioned as the most outstanding achievement under these conditions, the impression is left that it is quite important in a public relations sense, but must be considered along with the many other achievements of the program when the entire program is systematically reviewed.

The interviewees felt that a decrease in community apathy and a spirit of cooperation between school and community were two specific problems that had been met by the program. These two problems appear to have been a concern of most persons who completed questionnaires and/or were interviewed, and the fact that it was a concern is possibly a positive indication that an attempt is being made to "bridge the gap" between school and community. This conclusion would seem to be further substantiated by the fact that the interviewees regarded the two most important perceived needs that had emerged as a result of the program to be an awareness of the problems which the Fort Gay-Thompson community faces and an emerging understanding that these problems could be met only through involvement of all community groups.

The community representatives felt strongly that the program had been well worth the time and money invested in it, and administrators, teachers, and Council members, although somewhat less positive, also felt that the resources had been applied in a worthy manner. The results of the newsletter survey indicated that more than half of those who responded listen to WFGH,

the FM radio station, every day, and almost one-fourth of them indicated that they listened several times a day. Gospel singing was the most popular type of program, and it was closely followed by country and western music. The preference for articles in the newsletter was for neighborhood news, school news, and short stories.

In summary, the persons responding to the questionnaires and participating in the interviews gave freely of their opinions and advice. The evaluation was very open, and many different points of view were expressed. Problems in the operation of the School Community Council and the existence of a general apathy in the community were indicated on the questionnaires and during the interviews, but the resulting impression is that, in spite of conflict, a great deal has been done for the children of the Fort Gay-Thompson community. They have experienced many activities that would have otherwise been impossible.